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## Writing the Liquid City: Excavating Urban Ecologies after Katrina

Anna Hartnell

### Abstract

Water has long been a repressed aspect of the New Orleans landscape: for much of the city's history, the Mississippi River - New Orleans' *raison d'être* - has largely been obscured from view. Levees have long artificially controlled not just the Mississippi but the vast network of canals and waterways that carve up the city. Floods are experienced as a traumatic intrusion. And yet New Orleans is sinking while the waters surrounding it continue to rise. This essay explores this cultural forgetfulness with regards to water through two key post-Hurricane Katrina texts: Benh Zeitlin's film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) and Moira Crone's novelistic work of speculative fiction, *The Not Yet* (2012). It suggests that both texts work against this memory loss as a way of reintroducing a chronology that transcends the compartmentalized and short-term temporality that characterizes neoliberal capitalism, and which fuels our blindness vis-à-vis climate change.

This essay mobilizes Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity as a way of thinking about this collapsed temporality, and contrasts it with the liquid precarity on display in both texts due to rising sea levels. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* features a flooded geography that lies threateningly on the urban periphery, while *The Not Yet* is set largely within the 'New Orleans Islands.' These landscapes speak not only to the 'slow violence' of 'turbo-charged capitalism' (Nixon, 2011), which belies the instinct to view flooding as instances of trauma, ruptures that might anticipate recovery. They also speak to an environmental agency that threatens liquid capitalism with finitude. I suggest that in fact, as both texts differently illustrate, the knowledge of this finitude is at work in the New Orleans cultural archive itself, that encompasses not only a violently forgetful liquid capitalism, but also powerfully materialized memories of what it means to live in time.

**Keywords:** climate change, fiction, neoliberalism, Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, water.

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The image of a drowning New Orleans that greeted the world in the late summer of 2005 was met with widespread disavowal. These graphic scenes of human and environmental vulnerability were viewed by many as incompatible with understandings of the United States

as the richest nation on the planet. ‘Is this America?’ became a common refrain in the global media coverage of New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.<sup>1</sup> And yet alongside such expressions of incredulity, commentators also voiced the sentiment that the floodwaters of Katrina had somehow brought to the surface material that had long been a repressed element of the US cultural imaginary. While this latter discussion focused largely on the way that Katrina had revealed the existence of widespread racialized poverty in New Orleans, this article will explore a different, yet related, subject of repression. For Katrina also quite literally mobilized the large bodies of water that surround the metro area, bringing into view a substance that has been paradoxically ‘hidden’ in an age of warming waters and rising sea levels.

This forgetfulness about water in New Orleans long pre-dates awareness of anthropogenic climate change, although its origins similarly date back to the dawn of the industrial era. Since its founding by French settlers in the eighteenth century, New Orleans’ very existence has been dependent on taming its *raison d’être*, the Mississippi River.<sup>2</sup> Successive floods in the city’s fledgling years inspired the French to begin erecting artificial levees on the site of the natural levees created by the sediment of the river itself. In time it would become apparent that the man-made levees deprive the soil of the water and sediment that builds the land – and which indeed built the entire deltaic plain via the rhythms of the Mississippi’s natural flood cycle - and keeps it from collapsing in on itself and sinking. In the meantime, the unintended consequences of levee construction was out of sight, and this process of asserting control over the river was reaching its zenith towards the end of the nineteenth century - with Louisiana now marked as American territory.

According to John Barry, to aspire to contain the Mississippi ‘requires hubris,’ and turned out to be ‘the perfect task for the nineteenth century’:

This was the century of iron and steel, certainty and progress, and the belief that physical laws as solid and rigid as iron and steel governed nature ...man had only to discover these laws to truly rule the world.<sup>3</sup>

As Barry’s account shows, in fact, the triumph of the ‘levees only’ approach to river control by the early twentieth century was as much about personal power and ambition as it was about science. Scenes from the 1927 flood showing black workers forced at gunpoint to sandbag the levees, sometimes using their own bodies as fortification, graphically illustrate

the interpenetration of one system of control with another.<sup>4</sup> The imperatives of flood control and social control were then repeatedly reinforced in the months following the catastrophe, during which black workers were coerced into refugee camps along the natural levee, for fear that the Mississippi Delta would be drained of its supply of cheap labour. Often suffering appalling conditions and abuse, these workers were only allowed to leave if they were summoned back to the plantation by their white masters.<sup>5</sup>

While the catastrophe of the 1927 floods taught fundamental lessons about the need to concede to water – via the creation of outlets and spillways – in order to stop the levees building up pressure and themselves becoming time bombs, reliance on levees continued. Indeed, they became vast, federally managed structures that attempted to dwarf the river. As New Orleans' riverine commercial advantages were being eclipsed by the construction of the Erie Canal and the coming of the railroad, the city's boosters attempted to make New Orleans more competitive by advocating for a series of navigation canals, which themselves required levees. The Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, commonly referred to as the Industrial Canal, opened in 1923, finally achieving the goal of connecting the river with Lake Pontchartrain to the rear of the city. The construction of the Intracoastal Waterway in the 1940s, which intersects with the Industrial Canal, provided another route from New Orleans to the Gulf. Finally, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), a brainchild of the Second World War, was completed in 1968. As New Orleans geographer Richard Campanella explains, after Katrina many would ask: 'why score and scour thin, delicate soils and invite dangerous water bodies into the heart of a bowl-shaped metropolis?'<sup>6</sup> These seaways funnelled enormous storm surges up into the urban core in 2005, breaching the levees that protected the Lower Ninth Ward, St. Bernard Parish and New Orleans East. MR-GO, itself an economic failure, also 'destroyed 8,000 acres of wetlands during its inception,' and 'subsequently caused severe coastal erosion and salt-water intrusion.'<sup>7</sup> Coastal erosion has in turn drastically reduced New Orleans' natural hurricane protection in the form of barrier islands.

Municipal drainage, alongside levees, is another major reason for New Orleans' subsidence, with many areas of the city falling below sea level in the early part of the twentieth century. New Orleans' backswamps, which represented a route into freedom for the region's escaped slaves but which conjured disease and degeneration for European settlers fearful of tropical climates, were cleared with the arrival of new pumping technology at the end of the nineteenth century. This enabled the city to expand rapidly towards the lake. As Campanella explains, these drainage canals that funnel excess water into Lake Pontchartrain themselves

necessitate a whole new system of levees and floodwalls that have lured people into harm's way.

The city's suburban expansion on reclaimed land coincided with another boom that was to similarly reshape and devastate the landscape, this time via resource extraction. The Louisiana oil industry, which imploded in the 1980s but which is still very much in evidence today, has scored and scoured vast stretches of the state's undeveloped wetlands that lie between New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. The fastest depleting landmass on earth, water reclaims marshy land at the rate of more than one football field every hour. Thus New Orleans faces coastal erosion and soil subsidence even before you factor in rising sea levels and the increased frequency and severity of hurricanes that we can anticipate with climate change. The physical footprint of New Orleans today is the result first of a colonial vision that deployed levees to contain the river, followed by an American vision that expanded the levees, oversaw the expansion of the metro area via suburbanization, and became utterly dependent on oil.

While the histories of all modern cities are to an extent entangled in the history of human-induced climate change, New Orleans, I suggest, offers a singular case study. Environmental threats were a consideration from the moment of the city's founding. As Campanella emphasizes, the founding of New Orleans was a dilemma, one that weighed its superior commercial and strategic advantages against the inordinately hazardous nature of the site itself.<sup>8</sup> From its inception the city's history has been punctuated by floods, and yet the expansion of the metro area in the postwar period has been a market driven process that has often turned a blind eye to issues of human safety, and this trend has only been exacerbated after Katrina. New Orleans thus encapsulates the challenge presented by anthropogenic climate change, in that its risks embody the unintended consequences of a process of industrialization largely dictated by the profit motive alone. What many have identified as New Orleans' neoliberal remaking after Katrina thus brings into conflict two types of liquid: what Zygmunt Bauman describes as a 'weightless' liquid capital,<sup>9</sup> the unfettered capitalism of late modernity, and the liquid precarity that quite literally constitutes New Orleans' watery foundations. Defined here as encompassing the inevitably unpredictable conditions of environmental agency, 'liquid precarity' encompasses the floodwaters that threaten New Orleans, and which clearly transcend the capitalist context that has nonetheless exacerbated the threat that they represent.

This article explores the interaction between these different types of liquid as a clash between mutually exclusive temporalities - broadly captured by Naomi Klein's recent articulation of 'capitalism versus the climate'<sup>10</sup> – via two recent post-Katrina fictions. The first section explores this conflict through Moira Crone's speculative novel, *The Not Yet* (2012).<sup>11</sup> It argues that Crone's deeply strange representation of the sinking 'New Orleans Islands' casts the liquid city as a site of memory loss, but one which might also work against this selective forgetting. The second section looks at the very different rendition of the future of the Gulf Coast that appears in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), directed by Benh Zeitlin.<sup>12</sup> While the scene of this film ostensibly appears to reverse many of the premises of Crone's novel, I suggest that in fact it similarly works against a violently forgetful liquid capitalism. Together, these texts excavate a post-Katrina Gulf Coast that encapsulates both the pleasure and the pain of what it means not just to live in our time, but to inhabit a deep time that at once encapsulates and exceeds human history. While it is articulations of 'planetary forgetfulness' that emerge most forcefully in these texts, the ways in which they differently glimpse the end of neoliberal capitalism gestures towards a 'planetary memory' which necessarily exceeds our ability to comprehend or narrate it.

### **The Liquid City: *The Not Yet***

It is 2121 and the Constitution, and thus the United States, has been abandoned. Instead, the world of *The Not Yet* is overseen by the United Authority, a loosely federated collection of 'Walled Urbs' and 'abandoned places.' The Walled Urbs are inhabited by Heirs, those who have been able to purchase their immortality. Beneficiaries of 'the Reveal,' they have been genetically re-described, the privileged recipients of regular prodermal upgrades and the latest implants. Shielded by artificial shells that protect their re-engineered bodies, and controlled climates that keep them under largely artificial skies, this privileged class has 'walled out' the vulnerabilities to which the 'Nats' ('naturals') or '*the great Untreated*' are routinely exposed. The Nats constitute, we are told, '*an entire generation*' who '*had no future*' in a world where sea levels rise and wealth and health have been redistributed upwards.<sup>13</sup>

This then is a disturbingly recognizable world of the superrich who can afford to insure themselves against risk, in contrast to a disposable population exposed to increasing precarity and forced to compete for diminishing resources. Though New Orleans is placed by Crone

squarely in the national predicament, most of it is nonetheless situated in the De-Accessioned Gulf Territory, on the fringes of the United Authority that now exercises a ‘protectorate’ over it. Only the engineered environment of ‘Re-New Orleans’ lies within the United Authority’s boundaries. This re-engineered New Orleans unmistakably recalls the ‘new New Orleans’ of the post-Katrina imagination, sometimes invoked to suggest the city’s triumphant post-storm rebirth, but more often deployed as an ironic commentary on what many see as the city’s transformation into a laboratory for neoliberalism.<sup>14</sup>

This process was arguably underway almost as soon as the clean-up began, when the authorities used the storm as an excuse to shutter public housing and Charity Hospital, public buildings that weathered the storm remarkably well and which were in particularly high demand given the numbers rendered homeless, injured, and in need of medical care after Katrina. The euphemistically named ‘mixed income communities’ – which include only a fraction of publicly subsidized housing units – and a private healthcare facility have followed in their wake. The veritable privatization of the public school system has also followed suite. While *The Not Yet* was conceived prior to Katrina, it was published a number of years after, and vividly reflects a milieu increasingly hostile to society’s most vulnerable members. Education and healthcare for ‘the great untreated’ has long dried up, an off-limits luxury for those for whom the barest survival is the highest aspiration.

Only the so-called ‘not yet’s’ have a chance at what this society has earmarked as social mobility: treatment that will make them over into ‘Heirs.’ The ‘not yet’s’ are Nats who have been adopted by wealthy heirs, who have in turn invested in ‘Trusts’ that will eventually finance their adoptee’s treatment. We are guided through the novel by Malcolm, the adopted child of Lazarus, a benevolent Heir who established a foundling house for ‘toss out’ children on what has become the New Orleans Islands. And yet by the end of the novel, Lazarus’ social and financial investments have all but collapsed, demonstrating that this charitable model – which in no way questions the status quo – has failed. As Malcolm, who has been ‘waiting and waiting’ for his Trust to come good, tells Lazarus, accusingly, ‘you told me to put off my very life.’<sup>15</sup> In this sense Malcolm and the other foundling children are victims of what Lauren Berlant has termed ‘cruel optimism,’ by investing in a future that seems to be forever withheld.<sup>16</sup> They are the literal embodiments of Lee Edelman’s ‘future child’ – the infinitely deferred payout of a present defined by denial and precarity.<sup>17</sup> Edelman and Berlant offer critiques of the future in the context of a market fundamentalism seemingly committed to deepening social and economic inequalities. Berlant in particular casts the neoliberal

present as the subject of a collapsed temporality that has reduced forward thinking to little more than groping for survival.

Interestingly, the virtual erasure of the idea of the future in *The Not Yet* afflicts not only those at the bottom of the social pyramid. Indeed, and ironically, it is the dominant class that has much more decisively gambled away the future. The Heirs, apparently immortal, have revolutionized their relationship to time. As numerous characters in the novel observe, while time continues to fascinate Heirs, largely in the form of dying – as performed by the ‘diers’ (another name for Nats) - they are themselves caught in a suspended time, ‘a timeless time’ in which notions of past and future have lost their meaning.<sup>18</sup> In this sense they are the personification of what Bauman terms ‘liquid modernity,’ which for him has overseen the annihilation of time. Ironically the Heirs’ colonization of time has made them into consumers of what Bauman describes as ‘instantaneity,’ the desire ‘*to pursue gratification while avoiding the consequences.*’<sup>19</sup> As one central character in the novel, Lydia Greenmore, constantly reiterates, Heirs ‘don’t *have* to live in consequences’ - a fact captured by having eluded the ultimate consequence of death itself.<sup>20</sup> As the same character counsels, the idea that ‘life should mean something, have a purpose,’ is a ‘Nat thing,’ an impulse that Heirs must overcome.<sup>21</sup> So although aspiring to immortality, their ‘floating’ lives paradoxically represent the short-term thinking that Bauman argues characterizes liquid capitalism.

For Bauman, ‘liquid modernity’ has transcended the long term investments of ‘heavy capitalism’ in favour of fleeting engagements that have liberated capital from its antagonistic dance with labour. While Bauman acknowledges that capitalism was always interested in ‘melting the solids,’ ‘heavy modernity’ envisaged new solids: ‘progress meant growing size and spatial expansion,’<sup>22</sup> symbolized by the ‘monstrous cage’ of the factory in which capital and labour, unequal as they may have been, were caught in ‘mutual engagement.’ Weightless modernity ‘let one partner out of the cage ... in ‘liquid’ modernity, it is the most elusive, those free to move without notice, who rule.’<sup>23</sup> In the world of *The Not Yet*, it is the quite literally weightless and wealthy Heirs who rule, in contrast to the solid Nats who remain rooted to their mortality and their poverty.

And yet, tellingly, it is imagery surrounding liquids, as opposed to solids, that frame the novel’s vocabulary of precarity. On his return to the New Orleans Islands at the end of the novel, Malcolm thinks back to a time ‘when all were on the same, watery, unsteady footing, when everyone knew things could change in an instant, that all was vulnerable, not some



completely vulnerable and some not vulnerable at all.’<sup>24</sup> It is the Nats, in real terms, who are forced to build lives on increasingly watery foundations, haunted by memories of storms and floods like those brought by ‘the Great Katrina.’ They have to negotiate their own physical footprints vis-à-vis this increasingly liquid world. Nonetheless, the walls that surround the Heirs separate them from the only bodies that they seem to find compelling and might anchor them to meaning: mortal ones. Indeed, the apparent memory loss experienced by Heirs, that in turn seems to be symptomatic of declining health, suggests that their ‘treatment’ has failed to completely separate them from the mortality they fear. The artificial shells they wear that mask the physical frailty that lies beneath function in a way that is analogous to levees: they provide a false sense of security through engineering that arguably stores up, rather than counteracts, future threats. As Lydia escapes an oncoming storm in a helicopter, there is a sense that the air into which she ascends is a fundamentally unstable refuge, given that the water that lies beneath her is rapidly cannibalizing the land that she too would like to call home. Thus Heirs in *The Not Yet* have not escaped the consequences of the finite world they believe they have left behind. Heirs too are subject to liquid precarity, not just to the forms of liquid that condemn them to the blank present of a timeless time, but also to the finite world beyond, that they both fear and desire.

The principal site of this fear and longing in *The Not Yet* seems to be the New Orleans Islands, the De-Accessioned Gulf Territory hanging on to the edges of a United Authority that has apparently lost its centre. Unlike most of the U.A., the New Orleans Islands remains the scene of human variety, where Nats and Heirs not only mix, but blend into various shades of grey in the form of the ‘Imposses’ who attempt to pass for Heirs. The old city’s decaying facades that are increasingly submerged as the novel progresses vividly reflect New Orleans’ long associations with decay, decline, and finitude: metaphorical trajectories that have arguably made the city somewhat unique within a supposedly future-oriented national culture that has long embraced the ideology of progress. Arguably New Orleans’ fluid geography is central to these associations.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the warnings issued by WELLFI - the ruling corporation that presides over Crone’s fictive world - to stay out of the ‘DE-AX,’ it acts as a magnet for Heirs like Lazarus, whose final act of suicide vividly highlights the self-defeating structure upon which the U.A. rests. Lazarus, the product of a system that has annihilated a meaningful sense of time, longs for that meaning, and thus embraces time’s ultimate expression for human beings. And yet Malcolm’s similarly motivated choice has a different outcome. Having managed to save his

Trust, Malcolm is seduced by the thought of a future with the inescapably earthly Camille, and decides to remain a Nat. His decision is to live in time. As he refuses Lydia's invitation to escape the oncoming storm via a helicopter ride that will deliver them into a life together as Heirs, he experiences a form of unveiling:

And, then, all at once, at least for me, Malcolm de Lazarus, for that one man, with his limits, his outline, his tale, this: the air, and the sky, merged - the wood of the pier and the crisp fabric of my jacket, the air going in and out of my mouth, my anger at her, and my adoration of her, and the terror and thrill I felt at the future, and the soft face of Camille and the journey we had dared to imagine – became all one single thing. My life so far, and in the future, collapsed, closed in – all the boundaries were lines that led to this one instant. There was only the moment, which was a passage, an opening. This was not simple, it was not painless. It was almost too much to know.<sup>26</sup>

The De-Accessioned Gulf Territory thus becomes the scene of embracing not just death but the life that is bound up with that experience. Where Lazarus' is a tragic act of resistance, the outcome of Malcolm's remains deeply uncertain: the novel closes with the oncoming 'roar' that might symbolize his future or the storm that annihilates that future. What seems clear is that his gesture reintroduces the idea of the future into a social world that has banished it. For this 'moment' that is not simply fleeting and transitory but which also signifies 'a passage, an opening,' seems to perform the formal rupture that Fredric Jameson argues is the Utopian gesture. He writes:

The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break.

Jameson glosses this point by insisting that this is not 'liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived.'<sup>27</sup> In this vein I argue that Malcolm's gesture is itself profoundly conditioned by his location on the fringes of a corrupt national project. The DE-AX, and particularly the New Orleans Islands, are the staging grounds in this novel for an alternative temporality. Crone achieves this not just by replaying the disaster of the 'slow violence'<sup>28</sup> wrought by neoliberal capitalism, but by gesturing beyond neoliberalism itself. As Jameson writes:

the most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the ‘real’ future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something that is yet to come.<sup>29</sup>

In this way *The Not Yet* dramatizes the ways in which liquid capitalism is always already bound up with liquid precarity, the conditions that might signify the demise not just of neoliberalism but of capitalism itself. New Orleans functions here, and as was clearly the case after Katrina, as ‘the canary in the coalmine,’ its peripheral location – literally and figuratively – paradoxically centralizing its role as a theatre for the unfolding of capitalism’s worst excesses. Ironically though, the sinking New Orleans emerges in Crone’s novel as a vehicle of solidity, of attachments rooted in time and place that transcend the short-term investments of the collapsed temporality that has paradoxically eclipsed the United States’ audacious claims to the future. New Orleans’ excess with regards to a compartmentalized national time gestures in the direction of a planetary memory that can only be imagined in the vein of Jameson’s SF futures that are yet to come. The ‘mock futures’ of a conceited national narrative gesture towards an archive that in *The Not Yet* bears traces of the sublime: ‘It was almost too much to know.’

### **Urban Ecologies after Katrina: *Beasts of the Southern Wild***

If Moira Crone’s *The Not Yet* is a commentary on the futureless temporality of neoliberalism, as well as a romantic engagement with a cultural and environmental legacy that might transcend what Wai Chee Dimock memorably describes as the ‘short chronology of a young nation,’<sup>30</sup> arguably the starting point for *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is the opposite. Where *The Not Yet* deals with a post-human society that has become dangerously disconnected from the material world, Benh Zeitlin’s film portrays a community that is quite literally, and self-consciously, anchored in mud and soil.

When Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild* appeared in 2012, some observers suggested that the film allegorizes the Katrina experience of the Lower Ninth Ward, an area with some of the lowest lying topography in the city, physically isolated from the rest of New Orleans by the Industrial Canal, as well being, not coincidentally, one of the city’s poorest

neighbourhoods.<sup>31</sup> There are some parallels in the film. Yet the defining physical feature of its fictive community, the Bathtub, is that it exists on the ‘wrong side of the levee.’<sup>32</sup> Like the inhabitants of Isle de Jean Charles, Terrebone Parish, Louisiana, the principal geographical inspiration for Zeitlin’s film, the Bathtub residents reside in a watery world that they fully embrace. Their problem is not the absence of (functioning) levees, but rather the fact that adjacent urban communities live behind them. As Hushpuppy, our remarkable child-narrator, tells us at the start of the film:

Daddy says up above the levee, on the dry side, they afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off. They think we all going to drown down here. But we ain’t going nowhere.

This statement of resilience belies a stark fact: as salt water invades marshes, this receding patch of land is starved of the freshwater from the Mississippi River that carries the sediment to build more land. As experts who proposed artificially engineering the river’s natural flooding of coastal wetlands have long since discovered, the network of dams and locks that extend up the Mississippi’s vast continental network means that the river itself now only carries a fraction of the sediment that it once carried at the dawn of the industrial era. Coastal restoration projects that involve sediment mining and land building are now underway, but currently they are nowhere near to keeping pace with coastal erosion. And most projects are time-limited. As Campanella explains, ‘any long-term solution to the sediment budget problem cannot have a project end-date.’<sup>33</sup> Zeitlin’s protagonists inhabit the dilemma bequeathed by a society addicted to short-term gratification and thus ill-equipped to deal with the unintended consequences of urbanization. Tragically, their community is haunted by the proximity of an end-date, which arrives in the film as a Katrina-like catastrophe.

In a mirror image of the New Orleans experience of Katrina, residents of the Bathtub who decide not to evacuate see their home swallowed up by water as a direct result of a *functioning* levee – in this case working to keep others dry. This fact highlights the unequal protection provided by flood control systems while anticipating the most controversial scene of the film: the dynamiting of the levee on the part of the remaining Bathtub residents. This act can be seen as that of a desperately poor rural community, residing at the bottom of capitalism’s pyramid, seeking survival at the expense of a modern, urban world that they define themselves against. As Hushpuppy tells us in the exuberant opening sequence of the film, ‘up in the dry world... they only got holidays once a year. They got fish stuck in plastic

wrappers. They got their babies stuck in carriages. And chicken on sticks and all that kind of stuff.’ In contrast the film shows images of an edgy kind of freedom: dancing, costuming, drinking alcohol, fireworks. The reckless abandon that characterizes these scenes similarly drives Hushpuppy’s father and his friends to destroy the levee – that has become a symbol of the straitjacketed, engineered and highly administered world that apparently lies behind it.

As a number of critics have rightly pointed out, the wild freedom of the Bathtub community carries a strong libertarian strain. Though this is a community ostensibly living on the margins of capitalist society, arguably what one critic describes as this film’s ‘explosion of Americana’<sup>34</sup> marks the Bathtub as classic frontier country. In this context the community’s violent act of civil disobedience is about more than just survival: it is symbolically anti-state. This is reinforced when, following the destruction of the levee, government officials issue a mandatory evacuation of the community, placing Hushpuppy and her extended Bathtub family in a hurricane shelter where social and health care workers are portrayed in sinister, Foucauldian lights. As Hushpuppy comments, ‘it didn’t look like a prison it looked more like a fish tank with no water. They say that we’re here for our own good.’ In this way ‘the government’ – imagined monolithically - condescendingly pathologizes its subjects, depriving them of their watery freedom, and subverting the Bathtub’s strong sense of self-reliance. Even Hushpuppy’s physical appearance is disturbingly disciplined in these scenes. When she and her father, Wink, escape the grim clutches of government, the viewer is rooting for them. This sequence led one critic to describe the film as a ‘Republican fantasy.’<sup>35</sup> Thus, while the rooted existence that the Bathtub celebrates is a long way from the post-humanity embraced by the Heirs in *The Not Yet*, arguably the film’s ideological positioning is similarly distant from Crone’s clear critique of neoliberalism.

Cedric Johnson goes so far as to write his review of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* under the sub-heading, ‘This is What Neoliberalization Looks Like!’<sup>36</sup> For Johnson, Zeitlin’s film encapsulates the anarcho-liberal politics that he sees elsewhere defining the response to Hurricane Katrina – a response that critiques the government’s failings from an inherently anti-government position. Johnson writes that the ‘benevolent elements of the state, such as the national guard, flood control systems, and the disaster shelter which serve as critical life lines in real disasters, are all depicted in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as impersonal and corrupt.’ Moreover:

The most apparently heroic act in the film, when Wink and his friends stuff an alligator gar fish with dynamite and bomb the levee to relieve flooding in the Bathtub is in fact, an anti-social and selfish act. Here, Wink and his conspirators sabotage the public good and the safety of thousands of citizens for the benefit of their small village.<sup>37</sup>

The dynamiting of the floodwall is indeed a selfish act: far from being ‘the most apparently heroic act in the film,’ it is rather the most troubling one. Johnson’s often very convincing analysis seemingly relies on the idea that the film (disingenuously) depicts the Bathtub community as the utopian antithesis of all that modernity is not. He suggests that ‘after viewing the film,’ despite *Beasts* powerful subtext on climate change, ‘some might walk away with the sense that the solution to our current crisis is to return to pre-industrial, quaint ways of living. We can turn back the clock, reject modern technologies like the Bathtub denizens, and live off the land (or sea) in small, autonomous communities.’<sup>38</sup> And yet, despite its loving portrayal of the Bathtub, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*’s power lies not in an unqualified celebration of its way of life but precisely the reverse. In fact, the film seems to suggest that this community have much in common with the urban world onto which it projects its demons.

In an early scene, Wink points to an oil refinery behind the levee and tells Hushpuppy, ‘ain’t that ugly over there. We’ve got the prettiest place on earth.’ Yet, as Patricia Yaeger points out in a strikingly insightful blog, the food that Hushpuppy brings back from her apparently fantastical journey for her dying father is carried in styrofoam, which is itself made from oil. Moreover,

images of acetylene torches, gas stoves, and gas engines remind us that although the film’s characters are battered by the forces of global warming and their carbon footprint is small, creating a carbon-free democracy is not their concern. The citizens of the Bathtub practice a dirty ecology, making do with what they can salvage from other waste-making classes.<sup>39</sup>

Just as the urban world pathologizes the scavenged world of the Bathtub, which Johnson claims evokes a ‘slum aesthetic,’<sup>40</sup> so the Bathtub denies its affinities with industrial modernity - while living on its scrap heap. In this sense, the mythical, prehistoric aurochs that haunt this film - that we see being slowly released from the melting polar ice caps - present as much of a challenge to the Bathtub as they do to the world behind the levees. Indeed, existing

as they do on the frontline of climate change, the Bathtub community are among their first victims. The aurochs themselves clearly function as vessels of geological time that connect the local manifestations of environmental degradation in Louisiana to the global threat presented by climate change. In this way they lend a sense of scale to a film that is ostensibly rooted in the local and the anthropocentric. By mapping coordinates of time and space far in excess of the Louisiana setting, the aurochs might themselves be seen as embodying a 'planetary memory' that resides beyond the human, and which represents knowledge that not only challenges human understanding but the ability to survive.

Hushpuppy is replete with survivalist mantras inculcated by her dying father. In repeatedly declaring herself 'the man' she defies not only her gender and her age but her fragility as a human being: in the closing scenes of the film, when she comes face to face with the aurochs, she feels herself at one with their power. But in the scene that follows Hushpuppy must confront her father's finitude. In fact, as Yaeger points out, 'the vulnerability at the heart of *Beasts* is staggering.' Her fantasy of strength and resilience is the hubris of youth, an attitude that the film constantly offsets with images of striking precarity. In this sense, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* offers no solutions or agendas. Rather, it tragically diagnoses our modern condition, wherein fantasies of perpetual survival are both necessary to continue and the root of our own self-destruction. In this sense we are all doomed to one day inhabit floodplains, whichever side of the levees – now essential in South Louisiana, even with their deadly side-effects – we reside. Hushpuppy is the 'philosopher-child' who expresses society's deepest, but ultimately unrealizable, wishes. As she poignantly states, 'I want to be cohesive.'

This is most fully encapsulated in Hushpuppy's adoption of the future anterior when she imagines 'the scientists of the future' who will know that 'once there was a hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the bathtub.' Her innocent and unfaltering sense of her own self-importance is a stark commentary on the delusions of the adult world, while the film's prehistoric imagery is strongly suggestive of a temporality that exceeds Hushpuppy's anthropogenic imagination - and indeed the Anthropocene itself. This layering of perspective, in which Hushpuppy is both simultaneously an object of identification and the vessel of a childlike gaze, contrasts sharply with another, earlier and now very famous rendering of the relationship between Louisiana's natural landscape and the built, manufactured world. Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1948), commissioned by the Standard Oil Company, is a docudrama that tells the story of the burgeoning Louisiana oil industry through the eyes of a Cajun child.<sup>41</sup> While the boy's parents are wary of the new oil rig established close to their

home, their son is fascinated by the machinery and drawn to the friendly and benevolent workers on the site. Following a blowout, the company quickly and efficiently clean up and move on, with no lasting damage to the environment – or so a fictitious newspaper story tells us. While Flaherty's wetlands are visually stunning and seem to harbour an enchanting way of life, the derrick, initially a noisy, dirty interruption to the apparently pristine wilderness, by the end is allowed seamless passage through the water as it exits the site. The boy sadly wishes it farewell, sensing the opportunity it represents.

While it is undoubtedly the case that the oil industry provides jobs and opportunities to Louisiana's coastal communities, Flaherty's seductive portrait of the harmonious relationship between nature, man and machine now has sinister overtones given what we know about the role played by the oil industry in 'scoring and scouring' the Louisiana wetlands, opening them to saltwater intrusion and, ultimately, reclamation by the sea. The major role played by fossil fuel extraction and consumption in global warming and rising sea levels globalizes and dramatically magnifies the devastating local effects of the oil industry. No such vision of innocence stands unopposed in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Its magical realist forays demand interpretive strategies that take nothing for granted. Rather than the seamless narrative we are offered in *Louisiana Story*, which skilfully borrows from the genre of the documentary to weave its spellbinding and dangerous fiction, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is self-consciously impure, as much generically as it is thematically. Just as its apparent critique of capitalism is in fact a tale of complicity, its apparent theme of the anti-urban return us imaginatively to the scene behind the levees - and to New Orleans itself, which, culturally, has much in common with the Bathtub. As Hushpuppy and her girlfriends embark on their apparently magical realist journey into the waters of the Gulf, they encounter a floating bar and brothel named Elysian Fields. This sad and sleazy symbol of New Orleans culture and geography is, like the world that Hushpuppy inhabits, facing oblivion.

## **Conclusion**

In very different ways, then, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *The Not Yet* offer critiques of capitalism by exploring the conditions of possibility for its own destruction. In this way they do not reduce the climate crisis to the 'story of capitalism,' a tendency that Dipesh Chakrabarty cautions incisively against. For Chakrabarty, climate change requires human beings to recognize that the Anthropocene has made us over into geological agents, which in



turn requires us to ‘scale up our imagination of the human.’<sup>42</sup> Crone’s post-Katrina novel paradoxically conjures the opposite tendency in her depiction of the dominant class. Heirs have so focused on enhancing their power as biological agents that they have become divorced from a larger sense of planetary consciousness that might transcend human experience. The Bathtub community in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, though apparently more in touch with the land – and indeed the water - they live on, nonetheless similarly view the world from their own, time-limited perspectives.

Levees and floodwalls come into view in both narratives as symbolic of a repressed and dangerous forgetfulness. They are monuments to the human desire to exert control over their environment, in ways that are effective in the short-term but which store up problems for the future. This engineered approach to environmental threat means that for South Louisiana, once in a generation, Katrina-like catastrophes are experienced as unanticipated trauma, from which people only wish to be delivered into normalcy. According to Lauren Berlant, “‘trauma’ has become the primary genre of the last eighty years for describing the historical present as the scene of exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed to just keep on going and with respect to which people felt solid and confident.’ But ‘the extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure.’<sup>43</sup> It is the very slammed-door departure represented by the levees that so magnifies the effects of flooding and creates the slammed-door effect of trauma.

In contrast, neither *Beasts of the Southern Wild* nor *The Not Yet* portray storms as a modality or cause of trauma; rather, these weather events are part of the inexorable ‘slow violence’ that each respective society has unknowingly unleashed upon itself. In so doing these texts dramatize what Rob Nixon characterizes as the ‘clash of temporal perspectives between the short-termers who arrive (with their official landscape maps) to extract, despoil, and depart and the long-termers who must live inside the ecological aftermath and must therefore weigh wealth differently in time’s scales.’<sup>44</sup> Time’s scales reveal themselves in epiphanic moments at the end of both texts: when Malcolm experiences time not just as chronology but also as a mesh that draws in both the material and non-material world, the human and the non-human; and when Hushpuppy discovers finitude when her father dies and she sees ‘everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces’ and senses that if any part of this mesh is broken, all might be lost. These epiphanies subvert the violently compartmentalized experience of

liquid modernity through a recognition of liquid precarity, that which both threatens the end of human life on earth and bears witness to a planet beyond the human. As Jameson suggests, these fictions bring us to an awareness of the present as prologue. In this context, the sinking and shrinking landmass of South Louisiana may be predictive of the future of the United States and indeed the rest of the settled world, but that is not necessarily the end of the story.

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<sup>1</sup> Articulated on September 2, 2005 by Clarence Page writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, this question has become the title of a musical track by Pat Metheny and Charlie Haden dedicated to the subject of Hurricane Katrina, and it has driven much academic scholarship that has sought to elucidate Katrina’s meaning for the contemporary United States.

<sup>2</sup> For full accounts, see Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), Richard Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2008) and Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> John. M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 21.

<sup>4</sup> See Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, ‘Lockdown Louisiana,’ in *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas*, ed. Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 55-61 (59).

<sup>5</sup> See Barry, 312-317.

<sup>6</sup> Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 207.

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- <sup>7</sup> Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 213.
- <sup>8</sup> Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 112.
- <sup>9</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000 and 2012) and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).
- <sup>11</sup> Moira Crone, *The Not Yet* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2012).
- <sup>12</sup> *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, dir. Benh Zeitlin (DVD; Cinereach Productions, 2012).
- <sup>13</sup> *The Not Yet*, 224; 237.
- <sup>14</sup> See, in particular, Cedric Johnson, ed., *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- <sup>15</sup> *The Not Yet*, 113; 215.
- <sup>16</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- <sup>17</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2004).
- <sup>18</sup> *The Not Yet*, 263.
- <sup>19</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 128.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Not Yet*, 271-2.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Not Yet*, 264.
- <sup>22</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 115.
- <sup>23</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 120.
- <sup>24</sup> Crone, *The Not Yet*, 203.
- <sup>25</sup> See *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas*, ed. Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), for the myriad ways in which New Orleans' associations with death are bound up with its aqueous ecologies.
- <sup>26</sup> Crone, *The Not Yet*, 274.
- <sup>27</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005; London and New York: Verso, 2007), 232-3.
- <sup>28</sup> I borrow this term from Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- <sup>29</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 288.
- <sup>30</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1.
- <sup>31</sup> Ben Kenigsberg, 'Beasts of the Southern Wild: A Republican Fantasy?' *Time Out Chicago*, July 6, 2012, <http://www.timeout.com/chicago/film/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-a-republican-fantasy> (accessed January 24, 2013).
- <sup>32</sup> Narrator in the 'Making Of' film that is included in the 'Extras' section of the DVD.
- <sup>33</sup> Richard Campanella, 'Beneficial Use: Toward Balancing America's (Sediment) Budget,' The Design Observer Group, January 2013, [http://richcampanella.com/assets/pdf/article\\_Campanella\\_Beneficial%20Use%20of%20Sediment\\_Places%20Journal.pdf](http://richcampanella.com/assets/pdf/article_Campanella_Beneficial%20Use%20of%20Sediment_Places%20Journal.pdf) (accessed January 23, 2015).
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- <sup>35</sup> See Kenigsberg.
- <sup>36</sup> Cedric Johnson, 'Watching the Train Wreck or Looking for the Brake?' *Souls: A Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 14:3-4 (2013), 207-226.
- <sup>37</sup> Johnson, 'Watching the Train Wreck,' 212.
- <sup>38</sup> Johnson, 'Watching the Train Wreck,' 212.
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- <sup>40</sup> Johnson, 'Watching the Train Wreck,' 210.
- <sup>41</sup> *Louisiana Story*, dir. Robert J. Flaherty (first released 1948; DVD; Home Vision Entertainment, 2003).
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- <sup>43</sup> Berlant, 9-10.
- <sup>44</sup> Nixon, 17.